Minding the gap(s): public perceptions of AI and socio-technical imaginaries

Abstract

Deepening and digging into the social side of AI is a novel but emerging requirement within the AI community. Future research should invest in an "AI for people", going beyond the undoubtedly much-needed efforts into ethics, explainability and responsible AI. The article addresses this challenge by problematizing the discussion around AI shifting the attention to individuals and their awareness, knowledge and emotional response to AI. First, we outline our main argument relative to the need for a socio-technical perspective in the study of AI social implications. Then, we illustrate the main existing narratives of hopes and fears associated with AI and robots. As building blocks of broader "sociotechnical imaginaries", narratives are powerful tools that shape how society sees, interprets and organizes technology. An original empirical study within the University of Bologna collects the data to examine the levels of awareness, knowledge and emotional response towards AI, revealing interesting insights to be carried on in future research. Replete with exaggerations, both utopian and dystopian narratives are analysed with respect to some relevant socio-demographic variables (gender, generation and competence). Finally, focusing on two issues—the state of AI anxiety and the point of view of non-experts—opens the floor to problematizing the discourse around AI, sustaining the need for a sociological perspective in the field of AI and discussing future comparative research.